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Media Presentations as a Strategy for Teaching African Politics

Robin L. Turner, Butler University

Student media presentations can deepen students' knowledge of African politics, build their critical thinking and communication skills, and highlight the relevance of course material. This article presents the media assignment I have used in two upper-level courses, African Politics and Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Africa, and three examples of student work.

The context

Butler University is a teaching-focused university in Indianapolis, IN whose students are drawn principally from the American Midwest. Upper-level political science courses attract International Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, and Gender Studies students as well as Political Science majors and minors. Butler undergraduates who take African studies courses often enter with interest but little substantive or experiential knowledge. Therefore, I design my courses to highlight the continent's diversity and to critically engage with popular media representations of Africa. I start each course with an open discussion of students' preconceptions and then present accessible texts such as Binyavanga Wainaina's (2005) "How to Write about Africa," or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) "The Danger of a Single Story" that challenge Western representations of Africa before moving onto other topics.

The media presentation assignment builds on this common foundation. In employing a common student strength, their facility with social and web-based media, these presentations also create a relatively safe space for student-driven discussion.

Preparation

I identified several course sessions that are well-suited to presentations as I crafted each syllabus. Each student signed up for a media presentation slot at the start of the semester, and I set aside ten to fifteen minutes of class time for each presentation.

Assignment Instructions

I provide the students with the following instructions:

This assignment has three components.

1. You will locate, present, and facilitate a short discussion of one session-relevant 2-4 minute media clipping (such as a video, a song, a multimedia blog, or newscast). This means that you need to complete the assigned read-

ing well in advance of presentation.

2. You will write a 500-750 word essay discussing your clipping in light of the session reading and turn it in the day you present.

3. After presenting, you will write a second 400-750 word essay that assesses and reflects upon your presentation experience.

Media Presentations and Student Learning

Most students present interesting, current, and relevant material, usually a short video or an excerpt from a longer video, and do a good job facilitating the ensuing discussion. Students have shown clippings discussing the struggles of West African female politicians for a session on clientelistic barriers to women's political empowerment (<http://youtu.be/7l7jPEr32IY>), describing Ben Affleck's advocacy of US involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo for a session on the DRC (<http://youtu.be/g7-SJ8PnMT4>), and a speech in which Yoweri Museveni called term limits "nonsense" for a session on hybrid regimes (<http://youtu.be/x9eeef51ME8>). Even problematic presentations can be pedagogically useful. When a student presented a speech excerpt that attributed Africa's problems to ethnic tribalism, for example, other students challenged the speaker's assertions in the subsequent discussion and used material from assigned texts to support their critique.

The students' essays also provide strong evidence of learning. The excerpts below present particularly well-written but otherwise representative examples of student work.

Monty Python's The Annoying Peasant (<http://youtu.be/rAaWvVFERVA>).

"The relationship between King Arthur (representing the state) and the peasants (representing community) symbolizes the tension between community and state in Africa... according to Peter Ekeh's perspective. The peasants had no loyalty to the King, just as Africans had "no loyalty to the civil institutions of the state" (Hydén 2006, 52). The clip also illustrates the lack of identification with the state...King Arthur comes parading in claiming that he is "King of the Britains" and that the peasants are all Britains. The problem is the peasants do not even know what "Britain" is. Similarly, state titles were arbitrarily created in Africa and not and not embedded in the local identity..."



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The Naked Option trailer (<http://youtu.be/YWuwlslWdu8>).

"This clip about The Naked Option pertains to the reading about African women's movements because Tripp and colleagues discuss the use of shaming and cursing tactics in many women's movements. Tripp and colleagues discuss how naked tactics have been used throughout Africa and how they are usually used as "powerful statement of condemnation also aimed at government authorities and their repression" (Tripp et al. 2009, 31). I think that the Naked Option was definitely a way for the women of these communities to attract attention from the government and make them realize that the issues caused by the oil reserves are important to them and they need to be addressed. ..."

"What It Means to Be Men and Women in South Africa Today" (<http://youtu.be/X0u2Kv7bDn0>) offers the perspective of numerous South African residents of differing races, genders, careers, and to an extent economic class in the form of recorded interviews. 'Violence Against Women in South Africa' (<http://www.5min.com/Video/Violence-Against-Women-in-South-Africa-516895089>) illustrates the story of an unfortunate South African woman who was attacked and maimed at the hands of her ex-boyfriend and his friends. ... Both videos frame South Africa in a static state denying both the negative and positive aspects that encompass the country. ¶ ... The Gqola (2007) text provides several key points that these videos promote: silence around violence, the

empowerment of only a select group of women by the 1996 constitution, the acknowledgment of feminine tradition, and the ideology of militarism. Both videos display these concepts in a range of contradictory ways...."

I encourage other faculty to use media assignments into undergraduate African politics courses. Well-structured media assignments can motivate students to look closely at course texts, help them to recognize the connection between course material and current events, and allow them to make a creative and compelling contribution to the course.

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Teaching African Politics with Wikis

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One of the things that interests me is finding ways to use technology to become a more effective teacher. This past spring, I taught a master's level course at the Clinton School of Public Service (University of Arkansas) entitled "The Politics of African Development." The course was taught in a seminar style. Approximately eight students enrolled. I combined some very traditional pedagogical techniques, with some new, technological teaching techniques.

The traditional techniques that worked well for me were assigning students around sixty pages of reading per class. We had a roundtable discussion of the readings, which I conducted using the Socratic method. In addition to this

daily assignment, I incorporated one presentation by each student using powerpoint on a development issue of interest to them in Africa. I also incorporated a final assignment requiring students to create a "wiki" on a country of interest to them. This was actually an idea I got from my colleagues last year from participating in a teaching panel at the ASA.

The wiki assignment went well. To set up a wiki, simply go to www.wikispaces.com. I personally like to have two wiki accounts, one using my personal email, and one using my work email so I can keep wiki projects separate. There is no cost to set up a wiki, and there are online tutorials for teachers about how to use the technology to one's best

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